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ARTHUR ALMEIDA OF ILWU LOCAL 13, PCPA

INTERVIEWEE: ARTHUR ALMEIDA

INTERVIEWERS: HARVEY SCHWARTZ

SUBJECTS: ARTHUR ALMEIDA, WATERFRONT, LONGSHOREMAN, LOCAL 13, SAN FRANCISCO

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[00:00:00] **HARVEY SCHWARTZ:** Art, can you give us your name and your date of birth?

[00:00:15] **ARTHUR ALMEIDA:** My name is Arthur Almeida. I was born on the 27th day of December 1928 in San Pedro, California.

[00:00:25] **HARVEY:** Can you give us a little bit about what it was like growing up in San Pedro, what that was like?

[00:00:29] **ART:** I can remember as far as back as the Depression. As a kid I remember my mother took me along with a truckload of onion pickers to send out to the Dominguez [Hills] , this must have been around 1934 or '5 and that's the earliest I can remember. And I can remember 1938, I sold newspapers in front of the Globe Theater, it was built around the turn of the century. I used to sell papers there. We used to call the Daily Fishwrap, the Daily News, which was not exactly a progressive, liberal newspaper. It was the only time in my life that I shared equally with the boss. Newspapers were three cents, the boss got a penny and the newspaper got a penny and I got a penny. So we split three ways, which I don't think I've had an experience like that since, well, since I've joined the ILWU. I've come reasonably close.

[00:01:45] **HARVEY:** First of all, what did you do during the Second World War?

[00:01:48] **ART:** I went to high school. I went to high school in 1944, played football in '45 and ran track. And graduated from Pedro High in 1947.

[00:02:06] **HARVEY:** What'd you do then?

[00:02:09] **ART:** '47 was slow economically in San Pedro, although fishing was reasonably good but I was not a fisherman. And so I decided, I went to college for about two weeks—Compton College—I didn't realize what the hell was I doing going to college when I didn't have any money, no clothes, no job, so I decided to join the Army. I signed up for the signal core, I went to Camp Fort Ord for basic training. I signed up for a signal core, and I was sent to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey to the school there, which I lasted for about eight months.

[00:02:58] **HARVEY:** When did you get out of the army?

[00:03:00] **ART:** I got out of the army in 1950, I served not quite three years. I got out in May of 1950 and in June is when the—when I was discharged I was in the regular army so I served my time. In June, was it the 29th? When they crossed the parallel? The North Koreans? And it looked to me like I may be going back again. I didn't have to join the inactive reserves but the word was out the last to go was on reserves. Why I believed that, I don't know. So I joined the inactive reserves and two months later I was back on the service again. My uniform fit nicely and I was a lowly corporal and they sent me—I went up to Fort Ord for an assignment. There were two groups being split up, either you went to Camp Stelman, which is in Northern California or to Fort Lewis, Washington for shipment overseas to Korea where the action was going on.

I was about three out of a hundred who did not go overseas. I happened to have the right MOS, military occupation specification, I was a central office technician and they were opening up Camp Cook to train the 40th from southern California and 44th from Illinois. So we had to get the communication system because from the interim from '45 to 1950, seems like every kid in the neighborhood had to grow up and shoot crows, or whatever it was in the cables, the telephone cables were full of holes and so they had to plug them up to fix the system to use the telephones. So that was part of my job. I worked in the inside plant. I was at the school at the Monmouth, a central office technician school, which I graduated from.

[00:05:18] **HARVEY:** Did you go into the ILWU when you got out of the army?

[00:05:27] **ART:** Yeah, in 1950 I got out and my brother-in-law was a regular army—was a regular Class A in Local 13. So what I thought I would do was work for the telephone company with the experience I had, thought it would be nice. Well, I tried to get a job with the telephone company but they only wanted to pay me—let's

see, what it amounted to was less than twenty dollars a day. And I'd have to travel all the way to Los Angeles and I didn't want to do that. In the meantime my brother-in-law says, "Arty,"—he called me Arty—"We're taking in some sons and brothers now." And I'm like, "Sons and brothers, and relatives." And I was, he had married my sister years before so he signed me up as a relative and I became an ID, a casual in around June or July of 1950.

[00:06:39] **HARVEY:** What have you heard about the union beforehand? Before you joined it?

[00:06:44] **ART:** The ILWU—not much really. Although my brother had—he was a veteran of World War II and right out of '46, I think it was, or '48, they took him in into the industry and he was one. But, I really didn't know about unions quite frankly. One way or the other, I knew there were unions and those were longshoremen. Eventually my father-in-law, a lifetime member I learned from him. But be that as it may, I worked on the docks for about two to three months, whichever it was, and then first thing you know, I'm back in the good ol' U.S.A. army.

[00:07:34] **HARVEY:** Well now, when you became a casual, what was your first day on the job like?

[00:07:40] **ART:** My first day on the job was I think it was discharge, as I recall, on [? a looker back ?] job over on Terminal Island, great bulk. It was cargo from the East Coast and that was the first job. But later on, I could remember working box cars, discharging cotton that came in from the valley, discharged the cotton and just basic longshore work, you know.

[00:08:21] **HARVEY:** What was the worst product you ever worked? Something like hides or cotton or whatever?

[00:08:27] **ART:** Hides just stunk and they were slippery but they didn't offend me as much as—I generally went by what was hard, not what was necessarily offensive. Hardest work was working sand, black sand, from Australia. Sacks were not too big but they were heavy. Other jobs were rubber, which were unpredictable when you discharged 'em. You never knew which way they were going to bounce and they were awkward to work. A lot of times on some of these ships, naturally when they prepared them for shipment, they were square. And in the ship from, wherever they came from, Indonesia or wherever, the heat would cause them to soften and then they would flatten. And that's when they were hard to work, really hard if you didn't have a hook, well, you just didn't wear gloves. That's another thing. You'd hardly wear gloves. If you wore gloves on the waterfront they generally look at you, like a, should I say the word sissy? So most of the time you worked without gloves. Of course there was certain cargo, you better use gloves. So that's the most offensive, it was like rubber, pulling paper, bringing up cotton, working those sacks, working asbestos. Hides were primarily offensive because of smell, you had a lot of flies and maggots and stuff but I wasn't that particular—you had to work and make some dough.

[00:10:19] **HARVEY:** When did you get active in the union?

[00:10:22] **ART:** Oh I got—soon as I got out in a year, during the Korean War, a lot of veterans were called in and some World War II, had time, had action, had rank, had service overseas or in the war and they decided that—well, the one incident that I remember, was that women—I always read the L.A. Times, L.A. Crimes, as the [inaudible] called it—and I noticed that—let's see, I'm losing my train of thought. I'm having a moment at the moment. Anyway, in the L.A. Times you could always read about what was going on in Korea. And I say

this only because once I got back into the service I had the question of going to OCS [Officer Candidate School] and I asked the colonel, I for some reason knew that I wanted to be a second louie [lieutenant] , and he said, “No, you can’t do that.” And I’ll get back to what I was talking about. The point system was developed, why is that happening, they were complaining, one particular sergeant, a lot of kids was down in El Toro marines and he was running the golf course for the officers. Well, that didn’t go over very good. Letters like that were very critical that’s why so many men in the service when you didn’t need that many at all. So they start discharging according to points, rank, time in service, overseas, medals, wounded—that sort of thing. Me, I served time overseas and in Ansbach, Germany, I was there as an instructor.

[00:12:27] **HARVEY:** Pardon, when did you get active in the union?

[00:12:31] **ART:** I had to get back.

[00:12:34] **HARVEY:** I mean in union politics, union office. When did you start to run for office? Because I know you’re an officer.

[00:12:43] **ART:** I got active, “hitting the mic,” as they used to say, in the late ‘50s, around 1957. I did not become an officer of B8 until ‘62. Then I became a vice president in ‘65, president in 1976 for two years and was selected in the 1976 caucus, which is in Seattle, the only caucus I ever chaired. And that’s the year that Harry retired. Harry Bridges in case you don’t know.

[00:13:24] **HARVEY:** Yes, we heard the name.

[00:13:27] **ART:** I thought you would.

[00:13:30] **HARVEY:** Tell me about your presidency, the year that you were president in 1976. What do you remember especially?

[00:13:32] **ART:** ‘76? The TW [terminal warehouse men] issue we got here in the warehouse, the terminal warehouse men. During the early ‘60s when Kurt Johnson was president of our local, we wanted to register men and the Pacific Maritime Association [PMA] said, “No, you can’t,” for whatever reason they had. So what we decided to do is bring men into the union as terminal warehouse men. They were members of the union but had no registration rights. And these fellas were allowed to work out of the dispatch hall, the employer protested, but they continue from ‘64 until 1976. Anyway as a result, the employer finally got tough, he says, “We filed a complaint about having non-registered men without their permission,”—which was true—“working out of the joint dispatch hall.” So they got an order from the National [inaudible] Board “You must kick out the TWs out of the hall.” And I happened to be president and naturally that was not the most popular thing to do, but I had to sign the order. “Look,” the attorney says, “if you don’t sign you go to jail.”

One fella I remember telling me, “You shouldn’t have signed, Art. You would’ve gone to jail and been a big, big hero!” “I know.” I figured that they would eventually get ‘em and my time came when we had the caucus in Seattle and on the day that historic moment started to get them registered happened when the issue of the commercial—the terminal warehouse in 13, and the [? wares and strappers ?] from Local 10. That was a big issue with them. And the delegates when I got up I was the chairman, I said, I turned around and I looked at Bill Ward and Harry [Bridges] , I said, “Would it be alright if we sent the guys to the other, and the 13 and 10 delegates, co-committee officers with the purpose of discussing the issue on deck.” And both Harry [Bridges]

and Bill Ward didn't expect that from me. I didn't even expect to say what I did. And they said, "Sure, why not."

So I told the delegates, because the delegates from the Northwest, they've been here for a long time, "Here we go again, darn it!" "You fellas are excused to go have lunch, come back, it's about 11:30, come back at 2, because we're going to discuss the question about what to do with the TWs and where's the [inaudible @] ." And so we had a meeting. And the first question that I asked was what does it take to get these men registered? I was speaking on behalf of 10, I guess they agreed with me with that tactic. [Bill] Ward said, "Art, the issue is no different. You transfer men to the low-working ports—

[00:16:53] **HARVEY:** Low hours?

[00:16:53] **ART:** Low hours, that would include Stockton, San Francisco, [Port] Hueneme, and there might've been a few others. But these are the majors, let 'em transfer into your local and we'll talk about moving to register these non-registered men. So I said, "Well what guarantees? You don't have any. If you agree to do that we'll work with you." And they did. Bill Ward and Harry and we got together and we decided to start transferring men from Stockton, Major [? Partdom ?] , San Francisco, and [Port] Hueneme came into Local 13 and that started the process. That to me was the big—there was a question of Black brothers who got tired of being—just working as sweepers. Although sweepers weren't paying bad money but they wanted to drive on cranes—they want to drive cranes, they want to drive machines, that's where the money was, maybe even working steady, which was a bad word back in those days. Working steady, oh God, nobody worked steady. Arguing with the executive board with my own people, I even got into arguments about how we treated the woman. Could I have a swig of coffee real quick like?

[00:18:29] **HARVEY:** Yes.

[00:18:51] **ART:** Historically that to me, my two years as president was the TW, which I am proud to say help is all. We still got men who are—Tuck, here this afternoon! [gestures] He was TW as he spoke this afternoon. And we got others. But that opened it up for the transfers from the low working ports up to 13 and to get these folks registered.

[00:19:26] **HARVEY:** What about the Blacks, did they get more crane drivers?

[00:19:29] **ART:** That came about more so when I became secretary in '92. You know the thing is with the leadership many times, other than our local, I guess other locals, they're not bold enough to move and to move sometimes to do something that has to be done but it's not popular, they don't like to do it. I was not afraid to tackle a question, I had it figured, are the men just in their demand to be bold or be machine operators? Well, I had my answer. They were members, many times senior members, of the local, and how could you deny them rights that everybody else has? And of course there were some other issues that I remember dealing with—gangs.

Now, winch drivers could come from the Black ranks, they can go to the tubes, or they can make up gangs, or they could drive for gangs, but they could not have a gang. Oh, that was a no-no. Blacks having gangs—heaven forbid! So the one time, they decide—the executive board, finally the breakthrough came, sign-up for gangs, so naturally the Black brothers, as well as everybody that wanted a gang, signed up. The fella that came in number two on the list was a brother, I can't think of his name—I know him like my left, my right hand—anyway he put

in for it. So it went to the executive board, he was second on the list, about ten or something like that, to be selected by the board to act-on-it—the officer, I won't mention his name, who was the secretary and took it to the board and the secretary reported, "I lost the list." "You lost the list?" "Yes, I guess we're going to have to make another one." "Yes, we better." It's Isakiah Watson, that's his name. Good ol' man, great crane operator too. Isakiah [Watson] decided well, he was entitled to the gang. He had the seniority! And they had lost the list. So they had to make a new list and guess where Isakiah [Watson] ended up? The bottom, back of the bus. So we went to the body and we had a big debate about it. I got up, the first man to speak was a fella Benny Rubelo, he was originally from the islands and he got up, and he said, "I say this." And he was right. You can't deny these guys, on what basis? Other than the fact that they're Black? So I was the second guy to speak and I got up and I said, "The Port's action should be reversed. I mean the initial list that went, that had Isakiah [Watson] where he did, should be approved." And I could still remember walking back to sit down, this fella was dead now, thank God, I shouldn't say that but rest in peace, he snarled at me, said, "You dirty n***** lover." And I says—

[00:22:45] **HARVEY:** Do you remember who that was?

[00:22:48] **ART:** Oh I remember his name. He's dead now, he's gone now, a long time ago. He was an old timer.

[00:22:55] **HARVEY:** Was he a prominent in the local?

[00:22:59] **ART:** No. He was not a prominent—let me go on. You'll get me in trouble like what's-his-name did this morning. [laughs] Anyway. Anyway, it went to fold and the body voted to sustain that first list that included Isakiah Watson. And he's a good man, he's tough, he had arms. The body—but when that guy said that to me I said, "To hell with you!" I mean it's a question of what you do is right! Because I was raised amongst some colored—Pedro High didn't have a lot of them, but the ones I knew were all friends, we were all kids, there's no reason to be against a Black or anybody else. But anyway it passed. That was a crowning achievement. But I was not an officer then, I was a rank-in-filer when that occurred.

[00:23:54] **HARVEY:** Um, we don't have a lot of time. When did you retire?

[00:24:00] **ART:** I retired on the first day of June 1994. That's when I retired.

[00:24:10] **HARVEY:** What made you decide to become active in the Pensioners?

[00:24:14] **ART:** Well, I had the union in my blood, I suppose. Becoming a Pensioner is another way of being active as far as the union trade labor movement is concerned. I like to write, I like to talk, I like to travel, I like going to the caucuses and the conventions and listen to the issues. So after—because while I was active as an officer, or a delegate, I went to a lot of caucuses. I went to the first one in 1962 and the first convention in 1965, the Jack Tar Hotel in California in San Francisco. The first convention and I've been to a lot 'em since then.

[00:24:59] **HARVEY:** Can you kind of give us a wrap up statement, what it all meant to me looking back? It can be brief.

[00:25:07] **ART:** How brief do you want that to be? [laughs] I'll wrap it up this way. I'm real proud of the fact that I have served as an officer of Local 13. I took on a lot of tough issues, I had more beefs with my own men, who sometimes had a hard time determining what was right and what was wrong. I always tried to speak from

my heart. One of the biggest beefs I had was saving a casual, a woman who was pregnant, and the PMA, head of the PMA was a woman, and she went after her with a passion I couldn't understand—"You're a woman! She's pregnant! That's what happens to a woman when they get married and have babies." I lost that case, I couldn't get the board or body. I took it on myself. It was early '82, somewhere.

Anyway, to wrap it up, it's been great, a lot of fun. I've traveled to Japan in 1977. They sent me and Willy Zen of Local 10, we went to a conference in Yokohama and then from there after it was over Willy came back. My wife and I extended our gift at our expense, of course, [Louis] Goldblatt didn't believe, or Harry [Bridges] didn't believe in global economy. In first class. I agree with that so I had no problem. So we went to Korea, we went to China, Korea, we went to Macau, the Philippines, and, of course, in Japan. But, anyway, those are the highlights of my life on the waterfront. I did a lot of things, traveled a lot of places and unless you want me to keep winding, that's the end of it.

[00:27:12] **HARVEY:** That's great. That's about what we had time for, that's much appreciated.

[00:27:16] **ART:** You don't want more, huh?

[00:27:17] **HARVEY:** Yes I do, but we got another.

[00:27:20] **ART:** That's enough.